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ABSTRACT

In October 1975, the School Board of the Los Angeles Unified School District appointed a Citizen's Committee to conduct an appraisal of the management of the school district. This Citizen's Management Review Committee (CMRC) organized itself into five subcommittees: Management, Policy, Personnel, Budget, and Decentralization. The Decentralization Subcommittee attempted: (1) to identify problems that are facing the schools as perceived by various groups in the district; (2) to evaluate the operation of the Community Advisory Councils (CAC); and (3) to assess the extent to which the administrative decentralization of the school district has progressed toward the goals and recommendations that are expressed in district policy documents. A random sample of 50 schools was selected. At each school, in-depth open-ended interviews were held with principals, teachers, and parents. Analyses revealed that power has not been significantly redistributed by decentralization, but that decentralization has increased the equivocality of authority and accountability in the system. (Author/MV)

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AN EVALUATION OF DECENTPALIZATION IN A LARGE SCHOOL DISTRICT[1]

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I. Introduction

In October 1975, the School Board of the Los Angeles Unified School District appointed a Citizen's Committee to conduct an appraisal of the management of the school district. The committee, named the "Citizen's Management Review Committee" (CMRC), organized itself into five subcommittees: Management, Policy, Personnel, Budget, and Decentralization. This report describes the work of the Decentralization Subcommittee. The bulk of the Decentralization Subcommittee was composed of lay and professional volunteers who were not voting members of the CMRC but who had considerable past experience with the district.[2]

The School Board charged the committee to evaluate whether board policies pertaining to decentralization were being implemented as intended. Part of this evaluation covers the board's commitment to encourage and promote public participation in educational decision making. School-Community Advisory Councils were established several years ago to accomplish such participation. Another part of the evaluation pertains to a reorganization in 1971 that decentralized the district into 12 intermediate administrative areas and delegated more authority to individual schools in managing their own affairs.

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[1]Paper presented at 1977 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 8, 1977.

[2]Members include: Janice Bernstein, Elreen Bower, Pedro Cabarloc, Fran Diamond, Ellen Kamon, Ward Keesling, Marilyn Kizziah, David O'Shea, Sandra Porter, Peggy Saferstein, Harry Silberman (ch.), Dan Weiler.

II. Study Purposes and Methods

A. Purposes of the study

Three purposes were defined for this study: first, to identify problems that are facing the schools as perceived by various groups in the district.

A second purpose was to evaluate the operation of the Community Advisory Councils (CACs). Although there are other forms of parent participation in school affairs, our charge was specifically addressed to the CACs.

The third purpose of the study was to assess the extent to which the administrative decentralization of the school district has progressed toward the goals and recommendations that are expressed in district policy documents.

B. Methods

1. The first step in our investigation was to define the goals of decentralization.

2. A random sample of 50 schools was selected from Los Angeles Unified School District stratified by level so that a proportionate number of elementary, junior high schools, and high schools were obtained. In addition, three alternative schools and three schools-within-a-school were randomly selected at the secondary level. All 12 administrative areas were represented in the resulting sample.

3. From the list of decentralization goals an interview schedule for school level data collection was developed to ascertain the extent of community involvement and administrative decentralization in the district. Four interviews were conducted at each of the 56 schools. Separate interviews were conducted with the following: (1) chairman of

the school-community advisory council, (2) a randomly selected teacher member of the council, (3) a member of the council who was also a PTA member (if no PTA member, then a random selection was made from among the remaining members of the council. Most councils range in size from 11-25 members), (4) the school principal. Each interview lasted at least one hour and often required several hours. In all 223 interviews were completed in the spring of 1976.

4. In the fall of 1976 an interview schedule was developed for interviews at the 12 area administrative offices. Interviews at all 12 area offices were completed during November and December 1976.

III. Findings

The results are presented in three sections corresponding to the purposes of the study: administrative decentralization, parent participation, and perceived problems facing the schools.

A. Administrative Decentralization

Respondents were all asked the following question: "What is your evaluation of decentralization thus far?" (Decentralization here means the reorganization of the district into 12 intermediate administrative areas.) Respondents typically made several comments to this question. The comments were coded by category of response with three digits, one for each of the first three evaluative comments that were expressed. In many cases, fewer than three comments were given so table 1 presents the tally of only the first evaluative comment that was made in response to the question.

Table 1 shows that parents expressed more positive comments about decentralization than principals or teachers. Teachers gave decentralization the lowest marks with 60% of their first reactions falling in the negative column.

An interesting comparison of respondents from alternative schools and schools-within-a-school, with respondents from traditional schools, on their evaluation of decentralization reveals that respondents from regular schools are significantly more positive in their assessment of decentralization than those from the experimental schools (that were established to be more autonomous and responsive to client needs).

Though comparisons among areas must be considered very tentative due to small number of cases, the data generally suggest that the

Table 1. Evaluations of Decentralization by Respondent

Evaluation of Decentralization	Respondents: Prin N	Prin %	Tchr N	Tchr %	CAC Pres N	CAC Pres %	Parent N	Parent %	Total N	Total %
Positive comments										
More local autonomy, e.g., choice of instructional materials	13	23	10	18	9	16	7	13	39	18
Better access to administration by school staff	5	9	8	14	10	18	16	29	39	18
More citizen participation in school affairs	3	5	2	4	8	14	5	9	18	7
More support services	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1
Negative comments										
More paper work, meetings and responsibility	7	13	2	4	1	2	1	2	11	5
Less supervision, coordination and support services	2	4	7	13	3	5	2	4	14	6
Needless extra layer of administration; decisions still made at central office	18	32	17	30	10	18	4	7	49	22
No real change	4	7	7	13	5	9	2	4	18	8
Non committal (e.g., I don't know)	2	4	3	5	10	18	18	32	33	15
Total	56	101	56	101	56	100	55	100	223	100

inner-city sections were slightly more satisfied about the progress of decentralization. Respondents who were positive about decentralization were more likely to come from schools with Title I funds.

Many teachers and principals saw decentralization as a needless extra layer of administration. One teacher said:

"If anything it (decentralization) has made more red tape--more administrators to go through. For example, to make changes in the physical plant or to have something fixed or added we go to the area office but nobody has the answer at the area office."

A principal said:

"The changes since decentralization are negative. It is hard to find out who's doing what. Lots of things fall into the cracks, for example, personnel. There used to be one personnel office; now there are twelve and nobody can give you any direct answers. The authority has become too diffused. There used to be a specialist in all subjects that you could call."

Parents were more charitable about decentralization. One parent said:

"(Since decentralization) there is more communication between principal, teachers, and parents. Because more parents are encouraged to participate in all activities of the school, the school and community are more in accord, and you don't see graffiti here at our school."

Area administrators were concerned about a lack of adequate authority and resources. One Area Superintendent said:

"It takes eight weeks to make a small budget transfer--just to get another clerk to answer the telephone. I can't hire someone because the paper work hasn't come back from downtown yet" and "I would rather refrain from using authority which I'm not sure I have."

In general, the same ambivalence toward decentralization that appears at school and area levels is obtained at the district level. Although Board members expressed a commitment to the concept of decentralization, they repeatedly indicated that specific issues should be more closely influenced by the Board, that these issues should be more centrally handled.

B. Parent Participation

The following data summarizes our findings about attitudes of people toward the community advisory councils (CAC's).

Respondents were all asked the following question: "Overall, how important do you feel the council has been to the work of the school?" First responses were coded by category. The results are summarized in Table 2.

It is evident from Table 2 that respondents are generally positive about advisory councils and that principals express more positive views about them than all other groups. In general the respondents from the more affluent areas (with less Title I support) were less supportive of CAC's than those from areas with Title I support. Even when we examine only those respondents who were negative or non committal on decentralization, the Title I school respondents are more positive about the advisory committees than the others.

CAC's are judged to be more successful at the elementary level. The CAC's at the junior high school level are judged to be less successful (and incidentally are more dominated by the Principal and are more concerned with student discipline). The CAC actions at the junior and senior high school level are more likely to escalate beyond the local school to area and district levels.

When asked the question, Have there been important issues at the

Table 2. Evaluations of Community Advisory Councils by Respondent

Evaluation of Advisory Council	Respondents: Prin N	Prin %	Tchr N	Tchr %	CAC Pres N	CAC Pres %	Parent N	Parent %	Total N	Total %
Positive comments										
facilitates communication	31	55	25	45	26	46	18	33	100	45
assesses school needs and evaluates program & staff	2	4	4	7	1	2	4	7	11	5
initiates & supports school projects	12	21	11	20	16	29	10	18	49	22
Negative comments										
no impact, not important	5	9	12	21	9	16	11	20	37	17
divisive, negative influence	4	7	2	4	1	2	5	9	12	5
not representative of community	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	4	2
non committal	1	2	1	2	2	4	6	11	10	4
Total	56	100	56	101	56	101	55	100	223	100

school that were not brought to the Advisory Council? 78% of the respondents agreed that CAC's discuss most school issues and are not bypassed by the administration.

When asked the question, "In making decisions regarding the instructional program, is the principal at this school primarily guided by what the parents want, by what the teachers want or by his/her own judgment?, the principals viewed themselves as being democratic in the operation of their advisory councils, but parents and teachers see the principals as playing a more dominant role.

All school respondents were asked whether the advisory council should be more or less involved in each of the following activities:

- o Setting educational goals and priorities
- o Planning and evaluating the educational programs
- o Planning the school budget
- o Personnel decisions

Most respondents agreed that the CAC should be more involved in setting goals and priorities, planning and evaluating the education program, and in planning budget allocations, but fewer wanted more CAC involvement in personnel actions. The teachers and principals are especially concerned about excessive citizen participation in personnel matters and are more likely to view the CAC as divisive and not representative of the total community. Parents generally want significantly greater involvement in personnel, budget, and program decisions than they presently have or than teachers or principals want them to have.

Not surprisingly, when data for experimental schools such as alternative schools and schools within-a-school are inspected the students are perceived as having much more influence in most school affairs, and

principals as having a much lesser role than is the case for the traditional schools.

While 30% of all our regular school respondents wanted more CAC involvement in school personnel decisions, 75% of all our alternative school respondents wanted more involvement.

Most teachers were positive about advisory councils. One said:

"A parent volunteer brought up the problem of discipline (at the CAC meeting). They talked about the children's reaction to the no corporal punishment rule. Parents decided to formulate some standards and present them to the faculty. They volunteered to help with noon duty and outdoor activity. Its coming along beautifully. The parents are now helping in the classroom. They contact parents of children (with the teacher's permission) who misbehave."

Another said:

"There was a permit put out for intention to sell liquor across the street and a parent brought it to the attention of the principal. The type of people that this parlor would attract would be bad for our children. The CAC and teachers got together and discussed it and petitioned board members who joined our fight. They were not able to open their business across the street; we were able to stop them from opening. . ."

Parent comments on CAC were also quite positive. One said:

"We work very close (in the CAC). We can make our recommendations and some get adopted and some don't . But they are listened to and not tossed out the window. You haven't just wasted your efforts. It has encouraged more parent participation and that's important because your children see you take an interest in them. You don't see the dissatisfaction that you see in some schools. It makes a stronger bond between the parent and teacher. You don't see them picketing the school."

Another said:

"(The Advisory Council) is very important because the parents have a role in the actual school program. We can evaluate the material our children are taught. We can review our children's profile. We can help select programs and classes for our children. We help make budgets, sit in on interviews for hiring teachers and review lesson plans."

Principal's comments on CAC were also supportive. One said:

"The principal brought (the topic of new building needs) before the CAC. We determined there was a need and then proceeded to write letters and letters to Superintendent Johnson. By this pressure he was brought

down. He was invited out to the school and as a result we are getting funds for additional space in the girl's gymnasium. It should be completed some time (soon). It would not have come about without the help of the Advisory Council."

Another said:

"(The CAC) is an ongoing process of the school. Everyone is involved. We met on a Saturday and broke into groups, discussed all phases of the budget, discussed alternative options available to us; we agreed to convert one teaching position into dollars to buy teacher aide time and instructional materials. The results were satisfactory."

Some area office administrators commented on what makes a successful school-community advisory council. For example, one said that lack of involvement on the part of CAC's may be due to their having "no real responsibility in anything serious." This opinion is supported by the finding in our school level data that Councils in Title I schools are more successful than those in non-Title I schools. In schools with special programs such as ECE, Title I, gifted, and ESL, there are specifically defined tasks for CAC's such as budget sign off, program planning and evaluation, and recruitment of parent aides, which serve to organize and give them purpose and engages their members in meaningful roles.

Attempts to sustain successful advisory councils at any level must apparently address the needs of parents for meaningful involvement and not be restricted to the needs of the school administration to disseminate information and solicit support for Board policies.

Although advisory council activity is well established at the school level, community advisory council involvement is minimal at the area level. Most areas report that community advisory councils are important vehicles for enhancing school-community communication but see their main impact at the school level.

C. Problems Facing The Schools

All respondents were asked the question: "In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing this school?" Answers to this question are presented in Table 3.

These data indicate that our respondents perceived student problems (especially discipline), parent problems (especially apathy), and inadequate resources (especially housing), as the main problems facing thier schools. We might have found integration to be more prominent had we collected our data several months later than we did. The student problem was more frequently mentioned at the secondary level, the resource problem more frequently mentioned at the elementary level. Parents were mainly concerned about parent apathy, student problems and problem teachers. Principals were concerned about Resources and Student problems. Teachers were mostly concerned about parents and resources.

Limited resources is a prime concern of our respondents. A teacher said:

"One of the saddest budget cuts is in audio visual lower division film . . . we can't coordinate (material) with teaching lessons."

Parent comments also reflected concern over resources. One said:

"The school has the space on the hill to make another building but the man from the board said it would cost too much. We should add another building instead of all those bungalows that cut down on our playground space."

Principals' comments were also about resources and personnel. One said:

"I would like more decision making power where it involves personnel. Right now principals are basically tied down with the personnel that come with the school. There is not much lattitude in determining who works in the school and who doesn't. The principal needs to be given more authority in transferring (People) in and out of his school. We have very little to do in that. If I had that, then I could handle anything. If I had a teacher that was marginal (I) need to be able to take a stronger hand."

Table 3. Perceived School Problems by Respondent

Problem category	Respondents: Prin N	Prin %	Tcnr N	Tcnr %	CAC Pres N	CAC Pres %	Parent N	Parent %	Total N	Total %
Students (discipline & low achievement)	14	25	10	18	11	20	11	20	46	21
Teachers (human relations with students & parents)	2	4	3	5	6	11	10	18	21	9
Parents (apathy, human relations with school staff, transiency)	9	16	17	30	12	21	16	29	54	24
Resources (inadequate housing, maintenance, staff, budget)	17	30	16	29	17	30	10	18	60	27
Integration (staff & pupil)	2	4	5	9	6	11	5	9	18	8
Program (scheduling & classroom placement of children)	8	14	2	4	3	5	0	0	13	6
Non committal	4	8	3	6	1	2	3	6	11	5
Total	56	101	56	101	56	100	55	100	223	100

Another said:

"The prices go up, but we don't get more money (for materials) so our program is shelved; its very discouraging."

Still another said:

"I think the administration should start cutting budget from the top instead of cutting children's services."

Area office administrators also complained of limited resources. One said:

"Area office merely interprets district policy and is often faced with implementing policy without adequate resources or in ways that are not appropriate to needs of the area."

Another area administrator wisely advised as follows:

"If early decisions by the Board of Education cannot be made because of unknown factors and/or uncontrollable factors, than it would be wise to admit that the level of involvement envisioned in the budget development process by the school community is not feasible. Such an admission would be far better than to attempt to convince the school community they are involved. This would not be true and would be quickly recognized."

IV Discussion

The results of our study clearly demonstrate that power has not been significantly redistributed by decentralization, but that decentralization has increased the equivocality of authority and accountability in the system. The present organization is made up of community, school, area and central office levels that are loosely coupled with one another. Each level desires increased authority and resources for itself and more accountability of the other levels. At each level there are complaints about the lack of sufficient authority and resources to carry out its growing responsibilities. There are no more than the usual signs of tensions among levels with some resentment of protective policies that are often more onerous than the crises that created them.

The two most salient concerns expressed by our respondents were related to issues of accountability on the one hand and authority and resources on the other. When respondents speak of lack of accountability they are generally referring to those at the bottom of the system--the teachers at the school level even though the problem is systemwide. Parents want more leverage to hire and remove teachers; Area personnel worry about the age and tenure of the Faculty; Central administration is concerned about the shortage of quality bilingual teachers and the legal constraints that prevent the District from laying off or disciplining teachers whose performance is inadequate.

It is difficult to hold lower levels accountable when real authority and decision making still reside at the top of the system, but nevertheless there is some flexibility and autonomy at the school level that wasn't there before. Perhaps one reason why the letter of the board's decentralization policy rather than the spirit or intent of the

policy has been implemented is that inadequate resources have been relegated to the lowest level of the system, the schools. School site management requires additional staff training and, perhaps more important, additional personnel to carry out the budgeting and personnel functions that are implied in an authentic decentralized operation.

The testimony of District administrators suggest that the main reason why power has not been redistributed by decentralization is the tradeoff between the demand for local autonomy and community participation, on the one hand, and larger social factors on the other. For example, such factors as changes in the size and nature of the student population, judicial decisions and statutory requirements involving integration, collective bargaining, and the regulations associated with the numerous categorical aid programs, all apply pressure for systemwide action. Thus, these external forces are on a collision course with the demand by parents that they have a greater voice in the decisions that affect their children.

The Board's options are quite limited as these opposing forces become more and more polarized. In such cases two options are often chosen by an elective body: (1) compromise policies, and (2) loose organizational coupling.

Compromise policies are successful responses in a community where there is substantial agreement on fundamental values, where there is commonality of purpose, where disagreements are minor differences of opinion. As the situation becomes more polarized in a more pluralistic society, compromise solutions please no one--everyone is unhappy--both sides refuse to adjust. The compromise policy becomes a no-win option. For example, compromise policies in the matters of decentralizing the

District or desegregating the District, or in establishing any new program or service initiative in a halfhearted manner without sufficient resources, ceases to be a successful strategy in a highly polarized social context.

Loose organizational coupling between community, school, area, and central administration has some advantages. A loosely coupled system provides more autonomy and flexibility at each level because each level is partially independent of other levels. The main disadvantage of a loosely coupled system is that the ambiguity of its locus of authority leads to certain inequities. For example the more aggressive schools, or areas, are often those which get the most resources (squeaky wheel budgeting). That wouldn't be a problem if the most aggressive elements were the most needy, but as is often the case, it is precisely the most needy elements with the busiest overworked staff, with the least energetic parent groups, that are the least aggressive in negotiating their interests. Thus the rich get richer.

In some ways the problems we observed in the District management appear to be associated with the loose coupling and compromise policy formation in the District. There is evidence in our interviews of much feeling of frustration, stress and weariness with imposed limitations, constraints, over-powering amounts of work, and the sheer enormity of the problems. Many administrators spend almost all their time in meetings. New programs are added one after another, each with its own burden of paperwork, each with its own specialists, each with its own advisory groups. Whatever the initial enthusiasm of the administrators, it soon gives way to disenchantment and resignation--they are expected to do the job--make things work the best they know how with too few resources and

with little voice in policy. There is nowhere else to go. They think of themselves and their place in the system during happier times at an earlier position--several kept putting themselves in the role of a high school principal and hinted of a desire to move back into the old slot with no loss in salary. In those days they felt useful.

It appears obvious to us that no amount of embarassment or wrist slapping is going to alter the accountability of such people. Such measures will only reduce morale. Only systemic changes that alter the incentives for improvement can help. Placing blame on line officers who are unclear about what it is they are supposed to be doing won't help very much. Both Area and school personnel feel that more comes down than goes up--too much "help" is given by the District office out of good intentions. More upward communication is needed instead. The chain of command although quite clear on paper, is blurred because no one will claim the final responsibility for any decision. Each level insists it does not have the final authority. The area structure blurs the lines of authority and responsibility and the community doesn't know who is really in charge.

In short, there are negative consequences to continuing decentralization in name only. A decision to decentralize the system in substance will require not only a downward shift in power much of it to the local school site, but also the allocation of adequate staff resources to carry out such responsibility.

In Summary

Our respondents at the school level are fairly positive about advisory council involvement especially where meaningful tasks have been

specified for such councils as in the Title I CAC's. Respondents are less sanguine about decentralizing the district into 12 administrative areas which appears to have increased the ambiguity about who is responsible and accountable in the system. The system is now more loosely coupled and policies are more equivocal than before dentralization. The solution appears to be in the direction of reducing such ambiguity and tightening up the system, in putting more resources at the school level, in rewarding effective performance and in giving parents, teachers, and principals more input to the decisions affecting them. That the District is captive of its demographic-social-legal environment is only partially convincing as an excuse for the lack of true decentralization. In fact, decentralization is most evident in precisely those schools which have legally mandated categorical programs such as Title I and Early Childhood Education, in which local participation in decision making is required by statute. More attention to the spirit and intent of the federal and state legislation will go a long way toward circumventing the apparent dilemma between the demand for more local involvement and the external social and legal forces, which also purport to serve the interest of our children.

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